



Cooking with Basil

Who can resist a tomato, fresh off the vine, topped with fresh basil and a little salt, pepper, and feta? If there is a most requested herb at The Planter's Palette, it is basil. Whether people want common basil, cinnamon, globe or one of the many other varieties, cooks, and those who eat the cooking, love basil. Sweet or common basil have a clove scent, Thai basil a licorice flavor, Genovese and Nufar taste similar to common basil but Nufar has the advantage of being resistant to fusarium wilt.

In this area, basil is a tender annual and unfortunately, even indoors in the winter it will eventually die. It thrives on 6-8 hours of bright light, good garden or potting soil, even moisture and warm days. Basil will not withstand cold temperatures and should only be moved outside after the danger of frost is past—May 25 for the Chicagoland area. It can be grown in the garden, a large pot outdoors, or in a small pot on your windowsill.

To harvest your basil, pick the leaves in the morning sunlight when the oils are more concentrated in the leaves. Remove the leaves from thick stems. Small thin stems are edible. Fill a large bowl with water. Submerge the leaves, swish them around in the water, and then place on a towel to dry. If using later in the day, basil can be placed in a glass filled with cool water until you are ready to use or in a plastic bag with a damp paper towel. Remember, basil doesn't know the difference between outdoor cool temperatures and those of your refrigerator. It may get black edges if placed in the refrigerator.

You should always try to prevent any herb from going to flower by pinching the stems in front of the leaves. But if they do get flowers, you have a fresh herbal bouquet to use as a centerpiece.

I prefer basil when used fresh. However, it can be dried by either hanging in bunches in a warm, well-ventilated room or on drying racks. An old screen, well-washed and dried, elevated with a couple of blocks under each corner works well. When using dried, use 1/3 the amount you would use for fresh because the oils become more concentrated as it dries. It will turn brownish green as it dries.

Freezing seems to preserve a fresher flavor. The leaves can be left whole and frozen on cookie sheets, then placed in an airtight container. Again, there may be some discoloration due to the cold temperature. Chop them, place in an ice cube tray and cover with water. If you are going to use them with something that will have oil, use the same method but replace the water with oil and freeze. This is probably the best method for "fresh" basil in the winter for those comforting pasta sauces. If you are making pesto, you can make it up until you add the cheese because the texture of the cheese will change with freezing. Just add the cheese once it is thawed.

On with the cooking... There are many recipes that include basil from pestos to bruschetta to an array of pasta sauces—orange and basil on pasta, anyone? Just remember to always add it at the end. Extended cooking always changes the flavor of herbs. Try one of these recipes or become creative and start inventing your own basil specialty.

Basil and Parmesan Stuffed Tomatoes

For each serving you will need:

1 large tomato
1 Tbsp. olive oil
2 Tbsp. water

Filling

2 Tbsp. finely cut basil leaves
1 Tbsp. finely chopped flat leaf parsley
1 Tbsp. drained, rinsed and chopped capers
1 Tbsp. Parmesan, Asiago, or Romano cheese, grated
½ tsp. grated lemon zest
salt and pepper to taste
1 large egg, beaten
1 Tbsp. breadcrumbs

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Slice off the top of the tomato and save top.

Core and scoop out the inside. Turn tomato top and tomato upside down in a colander and allow to drain.

Combine all ingredients for the filling except breadcrumbs and egg. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Add breadcrumbs and egg to mixture and fill tomato. Place top of tomato on tomato.

Place covered tomato in foil.

Combine water and oil. Drizzle over tomato.

Wrap foil completely around tomato.

Bake for 30 minutes.

Pasta without Red Sauce

When I was teaching, one of the difficult concepts for students was that there are other things to go on pasta besides tomato (or alfredo) sauces. This was usually a big hit.

Cook 1 pound of your favorite pasta to al dente. (check the times on the package)

Melt 1 stick of butter or use ½ c. olive oil

Add 1 clove finely chopped garlic or 2 tsp. garlic granules.

Add 1 c. of your favorite herbs (like basil) using a combination of up to 3 herbs.

Toss with the pasta and top with ½ c. Parmesan or Romano cheese

For a different flavor try this.

Start with the above recipe but to the butter or oil add:

1 c. of shredded basil

1 clove finely chopped garlic

Zest of 1 orange (make sure you grate only the orange part, the white part under the orange is very bitter)

Salt and pepper to taste

½ c. grated Parmesan, Romano or Asiago cheese

Break 1 lb. Asparagus into small bite sized pieces and cook just until barely soft-about 2 minutes. Add to pasta and butter mixture.



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